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MOTIVATING ENGLISH COMPOSITION

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I believe in the school paper.

I believe in the school paper for the small high school.

I believe in the school paper edited by the English teacher and a board of student assistants appointed by that teacher.

I believe in the school paper as a vital outgrowth from the English class and a paramount means of motivating composition.

Concerning the school journal as a socializing force much has been said and written, but its vast importance as a means of stimulating and improving the work of English composition classes is sometimes overlooked. Even where its value is recognized, too frequently the story of a "defunct" paper is told in some such sad phrases as these:

Our paper was given up because of financial difficulties.

We used to have a paper, but it took too much extra time from the pupils' studies.

No one was enough interested in our paper to keep it going.

Our high school is too small to support a paper.

My own experience with high-school journalism began indirectly. The school of a hundred where I was teaching had no paper, but it had a literary society, more or less flourishing according to the energy of the teacher in charge. Appearance on the program was not compulsory, and so the teacher was at the mercy of the good will and interest of the pupils. They were usually willing to pass on to the literary society work done for English classes, but they strongly objected to preparing new material.

It was early spring when the writer's turn arrived, and most of the stock devices had been exhausted. For three weeks after my advent as stage manager, the backbone of the program consisted of the best specimens from a particularly good lot of short stories handed in as regular work by a bright Sophomore class. To vary the monotony the cream of prepared Freshman declamations was offered. Then came the grand inspiration.

One morning I opened the recitation in the Senior class by asking the members if they could and would keep a secret from fellow-students, faculty, and even the principal. In spite of spring fever they rose to the bait. Then I told them that instead of the regular numbers in literary society a week from Friday we would have a Senior paper. I had some "advance copy" ready to serve as a model. I read this to the class in order that all might catch the spirit of the production I had in my dreams. After promising English credit for the good things and no marks off for the bad ones, I turned them loose.

That very week they were in the throes of preparation for a bazaar which was planned as a means of making money for a trip to Washington. Here was a splendid basis for advertisements. I suggested this and other possibilities. As fast as thoughts came and were recorded they were brought to the desk for my approval. In some cases I changed and combined, in others little revision was necessary. By the end of the period we had all the "ads"—genuine and fictitious—we could use, as well as plenty of enthusiasm for "our paper."

This class had been studying prosody, and the course required a sonnet from each member. These students had chosen to write on Robert Burns, but in many cases inspiration seemed lacking. The next composition day I set them to work on that task, promising for the best result a place in the paper. They were allowed to substitute other material for the "The Poets' Armchair," one of our departments. Those who absolutely failed to win the muse were permitted to write up news articles based either upon real school happenings or upon things they were studying. Among the pieces of good "copy" that came in that day was a clever account of a supposed visit of Dr. Johnson to the school, as well as a striking feature story of the landing of General Julius Caesar upon British shores. I also got four very worthy sonnets and two other usable verses.

On the third day I suggested that we needed editorials, and here the class members wilted until they were directed to make free use of the magazine table, read a long article and summarize it in two or three paragraphs. It was an excellent composition

exercise, although but two or three of the themes were suitable for the paper.

On the fourth day we marshaled and read the material we had evolved, and filled the gaps with news articles, personals, and an editorial on the need for domestic science in the school. The latter piece of work came in a purely voluntary manner from a girl who had just discovered its editorial possibilities. I also added to the copy a rather attractive story which had been handed in the week before. Great care was taken that every member of the class be represented in the finished product. I got more live composition out of that class in a week than I had secured in the previous month!

The day of appearance came, and great was our relief to find that our journal seemed to meet with universal approval. Requests began to come that we make the paper a regular monthly feature of the literary society. I consented to continue the experiment as long as it met with general co-operation. When the principal came with congratulations and the suggestion that our paper be printed, I called my star Sophomore class to the rescue and let the desire to break into print enliven that class as well. Our revised paper was an improvement on the original, and a second group had become interested.

As to finances, a local printer who wished to advertise, gave us a special rate on the printing and we secured advance subscriptions at ten cents a copy from two-thirds of the school. A few weeks later our modest four-page sheet, the *Unionville Unicorn*, appeared with "The Spectator" as editors and the class of 1916 as assistants.

As the school desired another issue, we began the work at once and used the paper as a motive in composition for a solid month. The Sophomore class, then working on exposition and thus far hating it, rose to the occasion and furnished us with editorials, more than we could possibly use. The Seniors brought their contribution in the form of feature stories of various phases of their trip to Washington. The Freshmen excelled themselves in funny descriptions for "Want Ads" and items for the "Lost and Found" column, in addition to an amusing series of "strange adventure" stories. As this was to be called the Junior issue, I turned over to that class the reporting of new items relating to such interests as athletics,

German club, inter-school debate, Junior "prom," bird club, Shakespeare program, and the rest. On my table I kept a *Unicorn* box where contributions, signed or unsigned, could be dropped. No humor with a sting was acceptable, but all good, clean, genuine fun was encouraged.

The net material results of this effort were two issues of our little paper and enough reserve copy, barring news items, for two or three more. A far greater gain was a changed attitude toward composition on the part of many who held to the idea that they "never could write" and a greater effort from the others. One clever, but none too industrious, girl revised a story twice in order to have it accepted. Whenever a theme was handed in that had value for the paper, I marked "Return" under the grade. Those messages were both worked for and watched for. There were a great many, for I deliberately chose "copy" material for theme subjects or led the pupils to choose such material for themselves. These early numbers required much editing, but I feel certain that this part of the work will diminish in time, for it will come to be understood that the material that is nearest best as it stands will be given first place. However, this rule is not invariable; preference sometimes will be given to an article from a new contributor over a less-to-be-edited piece of work from an old stand-by. The ideal set is at least one item a year from every person in the school.

Before the close of school many pupils approached me on the subject of the paper. I consented to continue it on my own terms, at the same time reminding them that responsibility for success rested with them. Early in the autumn I purpose to appoint and post my board of editors, a literary and a news editor from each class. The literary editor must be one who is "good in composition" and in appreciation as well. The appointee may not be the very best, because I mean to give the post to the girl or boy who does fewest other things in the school and is still eligible. The news editors must be hustlers who will collect news and also look after circulation matters. One may be an athletic enthusiast, another a member of the German club or the bird club, a third a born humorist who can see and tell a joke, a fourth a good "mixer," who knows the business men and can keep an eye on what the towns-

people like. These news editors will be encouraged to a good-natured rivalry as to amount and style of copy. To the literary editors I shall turn over gradually the choice of the most usable material from the themes of their various classes. I may even let them try their hand at revising, in place of some original composition work. In a year they ought to know the trick well enough to be candidate material for editor-in-chief, in case we should decide that wider student control is wise. I mean to run this paper with very little extra work to the children, as I plan to assign my subjects with regard to their intrinsic interest to our public—the pupils and their parents.

The question of finance is a grave one. Advertisements from local dealers are not feasible, as the town is near a big city where most of our readers trade. We were able to sell copies of our last issue to most of the “substantial citizens” of the place, and we feel that our main hope lies in getting out a paper so good—so vitally recording the school life—that the townspeople as well as the pupils will feel that they can’t afford to miss a number. These, to sum up, are the principles at the base of success in such an enterprise:

1. The *spirit* of the paper shall be dignified, humorous, kindly.
2. The *material* of the paper shall be vital in its relation to all phases of school life, vivid in its treatment, varied in its scope and character.
3. The *contributors* to the paper shall be the whole student body.
4. The main *work* of the paper shall be done in class as a part of the composition work by a careful assignment of subjects which will make good copy, and a study of editorials, news items, and short stories in connection with the use of periodicals.
5. The management of the paper shall be in the hands of the English teacher and her carefully selected board of assistants.
6. The finances of the paper—rest in the lap of the gods!

Over the grave of every defunct high-school journal I would fain write “Lost Opportunity.” If this paper serves as a Gabriel’s trumpet to arouse any such sleepers, I shall be glad. I confess that my object in presenting this matter is that teachers in small high schools may be led to take up the question of the school paper and carry the project through.